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Dictionary of Humanisms

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Introduction

Why and where did I start.

The Why is that over the years I contemplated that we as a species needed some guiding principles to develop ourselves and to maintain a harmonious society.

Of course in previous lifetimes religion served this purpose. That had evolved over the millenia until as we discovered that we found our selves the beneficiary of whatever religion our parents had followed. Over the generations philosophy evolved to provide those principles based on evidence. Over the generations belief in the supernatural began to wane and we were left wondering what our principles were; particularly if we did not read philosophy which to most people seemed arcane and steeped in esoteric arguments which did not reflect their daily experience.

After all, in terms of Christianity most people who subscribed to the description of being a Christian know of the Ten Commandments even if they did not know precisely what they were. With the evaporation of superstitious belief we were left with just a feeling that we were at least what has been described as Tribal Christians, that is subscribing to the principles of Christian humaneness, even if we could not remember the actual commandments themselves.

Thus I started casting about for a guiding light which better reflected my education and outlook.

I have to say I am greatly influenced by the work of both A. C. Grayling and Peter Singer. [but don't get me started : Bertrand Russell, Isaiah Berlin, Julian Baggini, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins et al have all played a part] And my personal library of over 12,000 dictionaries and encyclopedias!

Humanism seemed to be what I was looking for. But I found, as you will when you look at the contents page of the dictionary, that I came up with 119 variants of Humanism. Not only variations on a theme but variations over time. And I am sure I missed some; somewhere at sometime someone may have spoken about say Marital Humanism or Magical Humanism. Thus saying one is a Humanist invites looks of glazed eyes.

Excluding the appeals to the supernatural, superstition, spirituality or god, three common essentials seem to emerge from all these humanisms ;

1. Ethical behaviour.
2. Evidence based outlook.
3. Education.

Thus I arrived at my own conclusion which was Evolutionary Humanism. Evolutionary because we understand now that everything is on the move to find more viable niches. It also provides for the insight that not all the twists and turns of nature are successful. Only a few people will have the time or inclination to consider philosophy in their lives. This may or may not be a good idea, depending on how things turned out!

Additionally we human beings have an innate sense, to the point of being a bias, that barring a few changes at the margins, we have arrived at a final point in evolution. On the contrary, substantial changes await human beings in their evolutionary path; the first that comes to mind is so-called Artificial Intelligence, which might be more appropriately described as Activated Intelligence, as opposed to our own Biological Intelligence. A new world is opening up in front of us. Provided the disaster of global warming does not get us first.

You should note the reservations about the term Evolutionary Humanism, tainted as it is by Julian Huxley and his foray into eugenics.

But the term Evolutionary Humanism is too good to allow an unfortunate twist in history to sully an expression decades later.

The best dictionary on Humanism in general is written by Bill Cooke and entitled “Dictionary of Atheism, Scepticism and Humanism” 2008, Prometheus Books. Bill Cooke tells how Julian Huxley left the rails by endorsing eugenics.

But Where did I start to put the dictionary together?

I did quite a bit of research starting with the big players such as ;

American Humanist Association : Many of the variants overlap, borrow from each other, or are subdivisions of one another — for example “Modern Humanism”, “Secular Humanism”, “Ethical Humanism” often refer to very similar outlooks.

Wikipedia : The word humanism has been used in different times, places and disciplines to mean slightly different things — educational movements (e.g., Renaissance Humanism), secular philosophies, religious traditions, political or social outlooks.

I then asked ChatGPT how many Humanisms there were. This was the response :

“There’s no fixed number of “humanisms” — the term covers many different variants rather than a closed list. Some sources list 3–5 main “types” for simplicity (e.g., liberal humanism, socialist humanism, evolutionary humanism) — but these are not universally agreed.

If someone asks “How many humanisms are there?” you might respond:
“There are many, and the number depends on how you count them. What matters is their differences in emphasis, not a rigid list.”

If pressed to give a number: you could say “at least a dozen well-recognised variants”, while explaining that minor or emerging forms might raise that number much higher.”

With this in mind my dictionary lists 119 Humanisms.

I arrived at this number of Humanisms by wide research. But to formulate the dictionary itself I then asked ChatGPT to give me a summary for each humanism. Thus this dictionary is essentially a collection of those summaries. As we know ChatGPT itself states that it makes mistakes, so anything you read should be done so with an open, Humanistic mind!

Dictionary of Humanisms

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The Dictionary

1. Academic Humanism is an educational and intellectual tradition that places the cultivation of the whole person—through critical inquiry, disciplined scholarship, and engagement with the humanities—at the center of the university's mission. Emerging from Renaissance humanism and later shaped by Enlightenment ideals, Academic Humanism affirms that rigorous study of literature, history, philosophy, languages, and the arts fosters not only knowledge but also moral refinement, civic responsibility, and intellectual autonomy. It treats the university as a space where individuals learn to reason, to question inherited assumptions, and to participate thoughtfully in public life.

At its core, Academic Humanism defends the intrinsic value of the liberal arts as foundations for democratic citizenship and human flourishing. It emphasizes dialogue, interpretive skill, critical thinking, and the preservation of cultural memory. While contemporary pressures often push universities toward vocational training or utilitarian efficiency, Academic Humanism advocates for education that transcends immediate economic concerns, cultivating reflective, ethically grounded individuals capable of engaging complex problems. In this view, higher education is not merely a pathway to employment but a transformative process that deepens human understanding and strengthens the common good.

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Nussbaum, Martha C. Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Kimball, Bruce A. Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education. Teachers College Press, 1995.

2. African Humanism is a philosophical and ethical perspective rooted in African cultures, traditions, and communal values. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people, the importance of community, and the moral responsibilities individuals have toward one another. Often associated with the concept of Ubuntu, African Humanism asserts that "a person is a person through other persons," highlighting the relational nature of human existence and the centrality of social harmony, cooperation, and mutual respect.

At its core, African Humanism values community, solidarity, and ethical living, recognizing that individual well-being is inseparable from the welfare of the group. It promotes empathy, compassion, and justice, while also honoring cultural heritage, oral traditions, and collective wisdom as sources of knowledge and ethical guidance.

Philosophically, African Humanism integrates practical wisdom with moral reflection, emphasizing moral responsibility, reconciliation, and restorative justice. Socially, it encourages communal decision-making, cooperation, and the cultivation of relationships that strengthen societal bonds.

In essence, African Humanism is a human-centered philosophy that prioritizes communal well-being, ethical interdependence, and the affirmation of human dignity within the context of shared cultural and social life.

Reference : "African Humanism: A Philosophical and Cultural Exploration", 2024 South African Secular Society.

3. African American Humanism is a perspective that blends classical humanist principles with the historical, social, and cultural experiences of African Americans. It emphasizes human dignity, self-determination, and resilience in the face of systemic oppression, discrimination, and social injustice. This form of humanism recognizes the need to address both individual development and collective liberation, situating human flourishing within the context of struggle, identity, and community empowerment.

At its core, African American Humanism values education, cultural expression, moral integrity, and social justice. It celebrates African American contributions to art, literature, music, and intellectual life while emphasizing the importance of ethical responsibility and civic engagement. It encourages the cultivation of agency and critical consciousness to confront structural inequalities and advocate for human rights.

Philosophically, African American Humanism draws on the legacies of thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and contemporary African American scholars, integrating ideals of racial equality, freedom, and human dignity with universal humanist values. Socially, it promotes solidarity, community-building, and activism as essential components of a flourishing life.

119. World Humanism is a globalised form of humanistic philosophy that emphasises shared planetary responsibilities in an interdependent world. It advocates cooperation across national borders to address climate change, inequality, conflict, and technological disruption. World Humanism views humanity as a single community bound by ecological and moral interconnectedness. It stresses global ethics, universal human rights, sustainable development, and intercultural understanding. The approach resists both nationalism and cultural homogenisation, arguing instead for planetary stewardship rooted in mutual respect and solidarity. It positions humanism as a framework for navigating 21st-century global challenges.

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